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SUBJECT: PARAGUAY: ENGLISH WORKS - MICRO-SCHOLARSHIPS PILOT
PROGRAM POPULAR

1. Summary: Embassy Asuncion,s home-grown micro-scholarship program to put underprivileged high school kids in Bi-National Center English language programs is effusively received by all sectors of society. Post encourages Undersecretary Hughes to support funding to continue and expand similar programs, as well as build essential English teaching capacity in response to overwhelming demand. End Summary.

2. Micro-scholarships With Mega-Impact: With the Department,s renewed emphasis on English language as a PD tool, Embassy Asuncion and WHA/PD have seized the moment to launch new programs. On May 30, Asuncion officially began its pilot English Language Micro-Scholarships project providing 60 exceptional, underprivileged 13 and 14-year olds three years of continued, intensive English language training at our local Bi-National cultural center. A sweet financial deal with the Bi-National Center brought in tuition at less than USD 200 per student per year. This program will prepare kids to compete for scholarship and exchange programs in the U.S., and will help Paraguay participate more fully in the globalized economy. Working with more than three-dozen NGOs, churches and civic groups, post gathered applicants mostly from marginal communities in and around the capital. The response was overwhelming despite a relatively low-key outreach announcement, with almost 500 applicants for the envisioned 50 scholarship slots. Reaction to this embassy initiative from all sectors of society - from ruling party Brahmins to bitterly critical journalists - has been uniformly effusive. One skeptical journalist looked at the list winners, names and home communities with wide-eyed wonder: "you actually got kids from the neediest neighborhoods!" he exclaimed in visible disbelief.

3. Plea for more English language program funding: ECA,s English ACCESS Micro-scholarships program is perfectly suited for Paraguay where our local partners can offer classes at a fraction of the cost elsewhere. The program creates tremendous goodwill with the public, and has an absolutely transformative impact on those under-served young people who benefit. Having launched the pilot program, Asuncion can confirm the high level of demand, the human and financial resources required, and the positive public diplomacy impact micro-scholarships can garner. Post requests the Department consider WHA/PD and Paraguay in particular as a priority area for FY 2007 ACCESS English funding. This is a rare opportunity when a modest amount of USG dollars can help a large number of needy and deserving youngsters while promoting our strategic goals.

4. Students Need Teachers: Infrastructure limitations: The

popular clamor for similar programs lays bare a supply side scarcity of qualified English teachers. Public sector English teachers often lack what we would consider basic language proficiency, and leading English teaching institutions are challenged to find and hire qualified teachers. Post has in place a robust English teaching capacity-building program, using ECA program elements such as English Language Fellows and Specialists, workshops, materials and more. That said, the need for more resources in this area remains critical. While the principal prerequisite for expanding the Micro-scholarships program is greater funding, the need to identify and train new teachers is an integral component. Capacity-building both in terms of teaching English teachers and reinforcing Bi-National centers would pay large dividends for U.S. interests.

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